

***The Institution of Engineers, Australia: Sydney Division
Engineering Heritage Committee***

Oral History Program: Biographical Notes

**Kenneth Mitchell HICKSON (1927 -)
Rail Signal Engineer**

- Birth & Family:** Born at Croydon Park, NSW in May 1927. Father was a fitter and turner and mother tailoress. He was the only child in his family. Ken married in 1951 and now has three sons and four grand children.
- Schooling:** Educated at Croydon Public School then Homebush Boys High School. Left school at Intermediate Certificate at 15 years of age.
- Qualifications:** 1952 Diploma in Electrical Engineering – Sydney Technical College
- Memberships:** Institution of Engineers, Australia; Institute of Railway Signals Engineers
- Awards:**
- Work History:** 1943 joined NSW Railways as an Apprentice Signal Electrician, at Hawkesbury River Station, Brooklyn. Several years later, passed an examination to become Assistant Engineer in the Design Office.
- Spent time in Design Office of the Signal Communications Branch. Automatically became Electrical Mechanic on completing the apprenticeship, in 1948.
- 1949 became Assistant Engineer in the Signal and Communication Branch Design Office at Wynyard. Had various positions working on layout of signalling schemes, track circuit technology, design of specialised signalling equipment and investigations into train collisions.
- Completed Electrical Engineering Diploma in 1952. Lectured and trained apprentices on the technical side of signalling for four to five years. Once he stopped teaching, a separate school was set up in Erskineville by Eric Archer. Wrote material for the course and maintained a position as occasional teacher.
- Was involved in the electrification of the Western line to Lithgow in the 1950s and in field installation. Also contributed to the signalling design of the electrification of the Gosford line.
- In 1965 was appointed Technical Assistant to the Signal and Communications Engineer.
- In 1968 he was involved in the introduction of the first electronic controlled vital signalling installed between Liverpool and Campbelltown. This was the first application of electronic control to vital signalling in Australia.
- 1970 was appointed Assistant Signal and Communications Engineer and inherited a deteriorated rail (??) system. Whilst in this position pressure was applied to begin the renewal of the rail (??) system and the first large contract to be let was at Sydney Yard Signalling, then at Strathfield and eventually the rest of the rail system. The contracts were given to private industry as the railways did not have the staff to carry out such a large task. Westinghouse was contracted to renew the Sydney Yards, which proved to be a learning experience for both them and the Railways. Federal Government took an interest in funding the

State rail systems. Worked on the design of automatic systems of signalling, the design of power supply and the design of track circuit arrangements. Was also responsible for maintenance in the country areas.

In 1973 became General Manager, Signal and Communications Branch. A year later in 1974 saw the commencement of the major upgrading of the signalling system in the Sydney Metropolitan Area. Also involved in the design of the signalling for the Eastern Suburbs Railway.

(Alignment) In 1975 became Assistant Director of Engineering and 1976 Director of Capital Works. In 1980 he was appointed Chief Engineering Manager, responsible for all engineering matters associated with the rail system. In this position he supervised in 1980, a report to the Authority and Government on the track capacities of the rail system for the haulage of coal to the coal loaders by rail. This resulted in the purchase of sufficient locomotives for coal and wheat haulage.

In 1985 the Chief Engineering Manager's position was divided and he became Director of Capital Works.

The unsuccessful attempt to reduce the power of the unions and Labour Council so as to enable a greater involvement of private industry in the repair of equipment particularly outdated suburban rolling stock. ?? *(This needs clarification)*.

Was involved in the BRB *(In full – I don't know what it means)* 'miniature' signalling relays. He believes that their introduction was beneficial to the system and it soon became standard equipment.

Since his retiring in 1986, he has travelled extensively in Australia and Overseas. As a further interest, he established a small home mechanical workshop and carried out projects for The Technical Aid to the Disabled Organisation.

Prepared by Freda Garnsey, 12 January 2003 from oral history interview conducted on 5 October 1999.